

Spiritual Olympians: Swimming
Matt. 14:22-33
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DON'T READ SCRIPTURE FIRST

Have you been watching any of the Olympic Games? I don't think our TV has had anything else on it this past week, except for Spongebob Squarepants. The Olympics are quite a spectacle; no other event gathers together so many people from so many nations in one place. Hundreds of countries send thousands of athletes to compete in front of millions of people over the course of only two weeks. The USA alone is represented by almost 800 athletes.

What a feeling that must be, to represent your country as one of the greatest athletes in your sport. Can you

imagine the amount of focus and dedication it takes to become one of the greatest? Think about the amount of time that Michael Phelps has spent in the pool or Rhadi Ferguson has spent practicing judo or Carli Patterson has spent working on her gymnastics routine. Every athlete in Athens has spent countless hours working on their skills to bring them to this pinnacle of their athletic career. Kyle Prandi probably did a cannonball or a belly flop the first time he dove into a pool. Only through years of hard work has he become good enough to represent the

USA in the Olympic diving competition. Lindsey Davenport didn't serve an ace the first time she stepped on the tennis court. Only through tireless dedication and countless hours on the court has she become the best.

The fact is, to become good at anything takes practice, and that includes having faith. One of the best books I read in seminary was called, "Practicing our Faith." I like that title because it accurately states how we nurture and grow our belief in Christ. We sometimes talk about faith as a one-time event, like once you have it you never need to do anything else. But that's like saying once you buy a car, you never

need to take care of it anymore. If you're going to use something often, even on a daily basis, you have to take care of it, feed it fuel, give it a checkup every once in awhile. Having a living, breathing, active faith takes practice, it requires us to build up our spiritual muscles and hone our God-given skills. We need to continually dedicate ourselves to practicing our faith in order to become spiritual Olympians.

For the next three weeks, we'll be looking at what the Bible says about practicing our faith through the lens of some Olympic events. Next week we'll talk about weightlifting, and in two weeks we'll see how running

fits into our training regimen. Today, put on your goggles and your Speedos because we're going swimming.

Our venue is not a pool, but the Sea of Galilee. So let's read our Scripture this morning: Read Matt. 14:22-33.

The disciples are out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee, during the fourth watch of the night, which would have been between 3 and 6 a.m. That means the disciples had been rowing and bailing for up to 9 hours, and had yet to make it across the sea. Why? Because the wind was against them. As Chicago residents, we understand the metaphorical force of that statement. You ever had that

feeling, like the wind was against you? You work and work and work and get nowhere, you take one step forward and are blown two steps back.

So the disciples are battling the wind and the storm and the sea. There's biblical significance in this battle. In the Bible, water is the dwelling place of all the evil forces against us, and it is water that God repeatedly conquers. In the beginning of Genesis, God's Spirit hovered over the waters and brought order out of the chaos. When Moses and the Israelites are making their escape, God parts the waters of the Red Sea. And in our story, as the disciples battle the raging

storm, Jesus comes to them, walking on the water, saying to them, “Take heart, it is I, don’t be afraid.”

Peter, always the most impulsive of the disciples, immediately asks to come to Jesus on the water. Some commentators scold Peter for putting Jesus to the test, but I don’t see it that way. Peter wanted to be where Jesus was. He wanted to be with his Savior. The water is where Jesus was, not in the boat. So Peter steps out onto the water and begins to walk toward Jesus.

There are two kinds of people in this world: sinkers and floaters. My Uncle Pete was a floater. He could lay on his back all day in his

swimming pool, arms outstretched, floating on the top of the water. I tried to do that, but I’m a sinker. I learned to swim by flailing my arms and legs until I either made it to the other side of the pool or splashed all the water out of it. But I never could float like Uncle Pete. When I tried, I always ended up at the bottom of the pool, which I found out wasn’t nearly as comfortable as the top.

The disciple Peter, as we learn in this story, is also a sinker. You know he floated for a second, right on top of the water. For a moment he was able to block out the howling winds around him and focus on Jesus and his presence. But just as quickly,

he remembered the storm, he remembered the wind, he remembered that he was only human and couldn't actually walk on water, and he began to sink.

Now, some may look at this story and say that Peter failed, that his faith wasn't strong enough. "You know, if he had just kept his eye on Jesus, if he had just had more faith, he would have succeeded." It's that fear of failure that can keep us from taking steps to grow our own faith. What if I start reading the Bible but don't understand it? What if I try to pray every day but can't keep it up? What if I serve at church but don't do well? What if I join the choir but miss a few notes?

Sometimes it's easier just to stay in the boat, isn't it?

Some people would rather stay in the boat than meet Jesus out on the water. John Ortberg calls those kinds of people Boat Potatoes. Sure, it's risky out there on the water, but it's just as risky to stay in the boat, because a faith that is not being exercised will soon atrophy and lose all its strength. If you never take the risk to leave the boat, you'll never experience the glorious joy of walking on water.

Fear of failure is a strong deterrent, isn't it? It puts a tight grip on us, controls us, keeps us from stepping out. No one likes to be a failure. But failure is not an event; it's

a judgment about an event.
And we control that judgment.
Ortberg tells the story that
before Jonas Salk developed a
vaccine for polio that finally
worked, he tried two hundred
unsuccessful ones. Somebody
asked him, “How did it feel to
fail 200 times?” Salk said, “I
didn’t fail 200 times. I just
discovered 200 ways not to
vaccinate for polio.” Failure
his how to choose to see
something.

When we contemplate
taking the risk to grow and
strengthen our faith, the worst
failure is not to sink in the
waves. The worst failure is
never getting out of the boat.
Jesus is not in the boat. Jesus
is out on the water. To try and
succeed, that is glorious. To

try and not succeed, that is
painful. But it is not failure.
Failure is not trying at all.

And if we do try and not
succeed, then by the grace of
God we’re given a second
opportunity. What happened
to Peter when he started to
sink? Did he go under a few
times? Did he become shark
food? No. He cried out, “Lord,
save me!” And Christ reached
out his hand and pulled Peter
up to safety.

Peter knew he couldn’t
walk on water. Peter knew he
would sink as soon as he left
the safety of the boat. So why
step out? Why take the risk?
Because Peter knew that with
Christ’s help, he could do the
impossible, he could walk on
water, and he trusted that if he

began to sink, Christ would save him.

Practicing our faith doesn't mean we'll be able to walk across the swimming pool but it does mean that we choose to believe that God is with us during the storms, and that we choose to live our lives free from fear. Yes, we will doubt. Yes, we may sink at times. But by choosing faith over fear, we are daring to put our trust in the God who stills all storms, the God who calls us out of the boat and into the risky life of faith put into action each and every day. It is our choice to dare to walk on water, or to just stay in the boat.